

LUNCH AND LEARN GANG: Belize: Central America's Garden of Eden

October 2, 12 -1 p.m.

Region II Conference Room

Belize! Just saying the name brings images of an earthly paradise to mind, one with unbelievably clear blue water, coral reefs rich with brilliant sea life, twisting jungle trails overhung with exotic vines, orchids and bromeliads. The air seeming to be alive with the calls of toucans and parrots, and there's always the chance to see exotic animals such as the regal jaguar and the roaring howler monkey. Magnificent waterfalls cut through stone mountains with multitudes of caves all around the country.

No, I haven't been there (yet!) but I've been talking to my friend Polly Rooker, TWRA's Region 2 Nongame Wildlife Biologist, who recently traveled to this most interesting country. Polly will be our next program presenter and will be sharing her experiences of her ten-day trip she took with a small group of nature lovers.

Belize, a small Central American country, is tucked under the Yucatan peninsula, sharing borders with both Mexico and Guatemala, and has about 240 miles of beautiful coastline on the Caribbean Sea. Slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts with a population of about 300,000 people, it currently has 40 percent of its land and sea in reserve status.

Forest types range from the coastal mangroves of the shorelines, to the pine and swamp forests of the flat interior, to the lush jungle of the upland escarpments of northwest Belize. The Maya Mountains of the southern half of the country support one of the largest and most diverse forests in Central America.

Polly will show us some of the amazing variety of wildlife, as there are approximately 145 species of mammals and 139 species of reptiles and amphibians that have so far been identified, including 56+ species of snakes. Belize is also a birder's paradise, with over 500 species of rare and beautiful birds thriving in its many distinct habitats.

Belize's people are as diverse as its nature with 50% Mestizo (Spanish and Indian descendants); 25% Creole (English and African); 10% Mayan; and 5% Garifuna (descendants of Africans and Amerindians such as the Carib and Arawak). Ancient Mayan ruins with deserted temples, ceremonial centers, and stone monuments remind us that once a remarkable civilization lived here. This mixture has resulted in a variety of traditions and cultures which have been maintained for hundreds of years. Polly will be sharing some of the stories of how these cultures have clashed and blended.

So come to the next Lunch and Learn Gang program and catch up with Polly's latest adventures in beautiful Belize!

Hosted by the I&E Department and held on the first Thursday of each month, except July, Lunch and Learn Gang presentations are about natural resource related topics and last about 30-45 minutes, allowing time for discussion during the allotted lunch hour. If you would like to make a presentation, if you have topics of personal interest you would like us to address, or if you know someone who offers an interesting program, contact Patricia Miller at (615) 781-5276 or by e-mail: Patricia.Miller@state.tn.us.